

Tropicalising Japanese Landscapes: Junichi Inada's Insights on the 'Japanese Sense of Beauty'

Text and images by Kee Wen Yu



Junichi Inada, managing director of WIN Landscape Planning and Design in Osaka, Japan, was accorded the Public Service Star at the 2016 National Day Awards for his contributions to the greening of Singapore.

A landscape architect trained in Osaka, Inada joined the then Parks and Recreation Department in 1983 upon his professor's recommendation. During his time in Singapore, Inada spearheaded several iconic projects, such as the development of Pasir Ris Park and conceptualisation of the Park Connector Network. He was also involved in the implementation of the Singapore Botanic Gardens Master Plan, which transformed the Gardens into the world's premier tropical botanic institution for research, education, conservation and recreation. The Gardens became Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015.

Throughout Inada's tenure in the Parks and Recreation Department and the National Parks Board, he constantly incorporated the essence of the 'Japanese sense of beauty' into the design of many significant public green spaces that are well-loved by Singaporeans today. He left Singapore in 1994 and now lives in Japan, but continues to work on projects in Singapore.

CITYGREEN had the opportunity to interview Junichi Inada and document his insights on the Japanese sense of landscape aesthetics for tropical Singapore.

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Image by Junichi Inada

You began your experience in designing gardens in Singapore in the 1980s. What were your design inspirations at that time?

I was fascinated by the Garden City vision and the lush tropical natural environment when I first arrived in Singapore. They still intrigue me every time I step foot here. In the early 1980s, I started my landscape career in Singapore by being involved in her Greening Master Plan. As a young Japanese landscape architect, Singapore provided endless grounds for my imagination to run free in designing lush and comfortable outdoor public green spaces, towards the goal of realising the Garden City vision. I enjoyed conceptualising beautiful gardens and parks for Singapore alongside Dr Kiat W Tan, the former CEO of the National Parks Board, with whom I worked very closely. In actualising the grand vision, I found myself constantly going back to my roots in traditional Japanese garden design, pursuing what is an innate part of me: the 'Japanese sense of beauty.'



How do you define this ‘Japanese sense of beauty’ in Singapore’s parks and gardens?

The ‘Japanese sense of beauty’ was first introduced in Sakutei-ki, the oldest text on Japanese garden architecture, as an intuitional approach to garden architecture. The Japanese Scholar/Practitioner Kinsaku Nakane interpreted this as the principle of revealing the ‘Japanese soul’. Looking back at my past works in Singapore, I believe my ‘Japanese sense of beauty’ is revealed in my garden designs through Fuzei: achieving a sense of balance through asymmetry and proportion.

How did you translate this ‘Japanese sense of beauty’ into your works in a tropical city like Singapore? How do you use garden elements such as rain, rocks, plants and sculptures?

It is important to observe and understand these garden elements in their natural states (in nature) to understand and apply Fuzei. For instance, for rain or water, the most captivating aspect is its sound. Water is liquid and dynamic in nature. Its freeform and flexible characteristics allow it to produce

different sounds, emulating different scenes in nature. This key characteristic of water is considered when designing with water for Japanese gardens.

In designing the Nassim Gate entrance precinct of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, I had very intentionally designed a waterfall entrance experience to ease the transition from the busy city to the Gardens. It is intended to create an impactful arrival into the Gardens by evoking the sense of hearing. The concept is to mimic the sound of a natural stream as it moves along different sections of its course. This experience is created using a series of cascading rocky waterscape features, detailed at different heights. The features were made from regionally sourced porous lava rock which adds a naturalistic touch. This naturalistic water feature is a rejuvenating element, key to the rustic and lush entrance for the Singapore Botanic Gardens where the visitor starts and ends his garden experience.

Rocks, on the other hand, represent strength, permanence and resistance as compared to the fluidity of water. They were a key element




3, 4. Evolution Garden in the Singapore Botanic Gardens

5. Summer colours in the National Orchid Garden

in the design of the Evolution Garden in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. At the design stage, I wanted to create a dramatic experience of travelling through time and chose rocks as the primary garden element. In order to showcase the evolution timeline, I designed a series of 'landscape rooms' representing different pre-historical periods of nature sequentially. The rock features were planned and sited to ensure a natural integration of the Evolution Garden with the steeply sloping terrain. The rocks for each historical period were thoughtfully selected to contrast with the eras before and after. The actual arrangement of the rocks was then adjusted to complement and showcase the living collection of unique and rare cycads, palms and ferns of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Rocks in the Evolution Garden provided the foundation for the movement and flow of the dramatic experience I envisioned for this garden. Plants are the 'living material' of any garden. The art of Japanese garden design pays careful attention to the selection of the plants to showcase the seasonal colour changes. This concept from my Japanese garden design background gave me the inspiration for the National Orchid Garden in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. The spectrum of

colours in the orchid collection in Singapore has always fascinated me since I first arrived. I planned the National Orchid Garden according to the colours of the four seasons – spring, summer, autumn and winter. Then, understanding the climate of the tropical city, I made sure that the design included shady routes and rest stops for visitors to rest and appreciate the myriad of orchids in the Garden. Including large shade trees for functionality and comfort is definitely a key design consideration for tropical gardens.

Lastly, can you share with us your thoughts on what makes a good garden design in general?

There is a vast difference between 'placement' and 'arrangement'. In order to achieve *Fuzei*, the garden designer/ architect has to arrange the elements in the garden, not simply place them. A good garden design to me is a well-organised arrangement of all garden elements for the pleasure of the five human senses. 





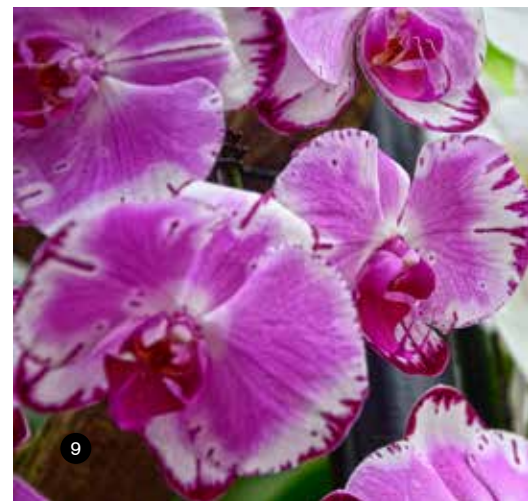
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6,7,8,9. Plants are the 'living material' of any garden.